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Our Palmetto Flag

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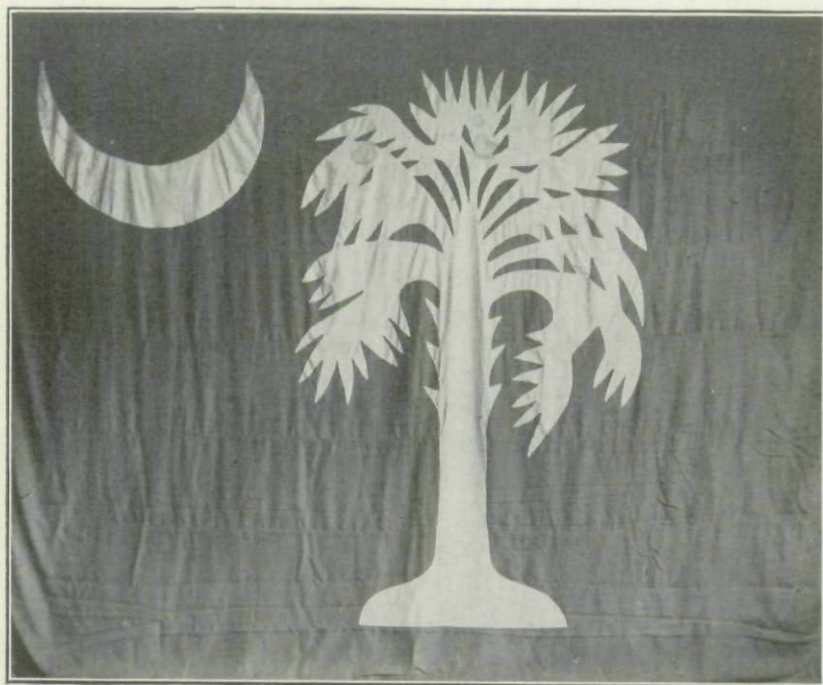
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PALMETTO FLAG

Captured by Soldiers of the 31st Iowa Infantry from the Capitol at Columbia, South Carolina, February 17, 1865, and now in the Collection of the Historical Department of Iowa.

ANNALS OF IOWA.

EDITORIAL DEPARTMENT

OUR PALMETTO FLAG.

The United Daughters of the Confederacy for the State of South Carolina have asked the return to them, for their State, of our great palmetto flag. This flag is ten by fourteen feet in size, of blue wool bunting, with a palmetto tree and crescent appliqued in white muslin. A similar flag is in the collections of the State Historical Society at Iowa City. Both seem to have been secured by Union troops at the same place, in the same way and at about the same time.

Our flag was presented to the State Historical Department of Iowa at Des Moines by Mrs. Mary Carpenter of Monticello, Iowa, a daughter of the late Major S. S. Farwell. With the flag she sent a memorandum autographed by Major Farwell, showing that the flag was captured by the 31st Iowa Infantry at Columbia, South Carolina, February 17, 1865; that the soldiers removed it from the capitol and shortly thereafter presented it to Major Farwell, then a captain, and he retained the flag in his possession thereafter.

Iowa survivors of the Civil war have protested against our receiving with favor the suggestion that the flag be given up. Opinions even among the soldiers differ on this point. The policy of the return to southern States of military standards taken by capture is cordially approved by some soldiers and by others bitterly condemned. The flag in question seems to have been the standard of the State of South Carolina rather than an emblem of secession or of the government of the southern Confederacy, and for that reason, technically, may not fall within the reasoning against the return of the Confederate standards. Any acrimony that may ever have existed as to the return of captured standards would probably not exist with respect to this flag of South Carolina, in one who has full knowledge and understanding as to its origin and

meaning. If any such acrimony should exist in view of such knowledge it would exist only against the State of South Carolina or its citizens, and not against other States or the southern Confederacy.

Major Farwell held this flag in a sense as a custodian for its captors and it was presented to the State Historical Department as a sacred trust for them and all the people of the State. The Historical Department therefore will never release this flag because it is the property of the State and could be disposed of only by the General Assembly.

But there are reasons for our keeping the flag that are more in accord with the purposes of the State Historical Department than are legal conditions or angry memories. Annually there pass through our rooms thousands and thousands of young people and new comers into Iowa who here receive their first impressions of the history of Iowa or have impressions stimulated to higher appreciation than is done in any other way. Objects strike the eye and the terse, accurate language of labels strikes the attention of many visitors who have not time, taste or talent for the perusal of many books. They undergo few influences stronger or more persistent than are the museum and memorial features of our collections. No object suggests at sight more vividly or perfectly an event of historic importance to our country in which Iowa and its soldiers participated than does this great palmetto flag. Its silent ministry will continue as long as Iowa and South Carolina exist. It will speak volumes for South Carolina where chapters might not be read of her by sons of Iowa. It engenders disrespect and adverse comment only in rare instances of especially embittered soldiers of the Civil war. When the last of these has gone and the bronze button has become a memory cherished as is that of Revolutionary heroes by our oldest men, no one in Iowa or America will look with disrespect upon any memento of the great conflict.

Those who administer the affairs of the Historical Department, as indeed our generation, have, far more than is generally recognized, merely a trust in historical materials. Properly discharging this trust we will reserve for future

generations adequate aids with which to illustrate and interpret all the important public events. In the distant future Iowa must embrace as citizens the sons of Carolina soldiers under Robert Lee and among Carolina citizens must inevitably be found descendants of Iowa soldiers under U. S. Grant. In Iowa soil there are the ashes of at least eight Revolutionary soldiers of whom one was born in South Carolina, two in Virginia, and one in Maryland. At a time as far removed from the Civil war as we now are from the Revolution, the preservation in Iowa of this palmetto flag will doubtless be universally approved even by the children and descendants of men who were Carolina soldiers under the Stars and Bars. In the meantime it will be accessible to perhaps as many tolerant souls as would observe it were it returned to South Carolina. Commerce and other currents of social life hold State lines in utter disregard. The bitterness of the Civil war is rapidly vanishing. It seems to us, in the light of these conditions and of our sacred trust to the future, that the withdrawal by our State from its collection of historic treasures of an emblem of another State, even though it might have been at one time a reminder of hate and bitterness, should now be neither requested nor considered.

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